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ABSTRACT

Initial impressions of a counselor's credibility and attractiveness may affect the development of rapport as well as client attrition. Recent research has focused on contextual clues in the counseling setting which may influence client perceptions. The effects of counselor attire and the seating arrangement were examined in a counseling analogue in which 206 college students viewed a slide presentation and listened to a taped interview. Although the casual attire/no desk setting elicited the highest attraction ratings, the counselor was perceived as maximally expert in the formal attire/behind desk context. Females responded to the behind the desk arrangement with lower counselor ratings across all measures. Initial impressions were highly correlated with subjects' willingness to see the counselor. The results suggest that the meaning of individual cues for a client may be determined only within a more global context of other cues. (Author/JAC)

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THERAPEUTIC INFLUENCE AS A FUNCTION OF COUNSELOR ATTIRE AND THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT IN AN INITIAL INTERVIEW

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Therapeutic Influence as a Function of Counselor Attire and the Seating Arrangement in an Initial Interview

Initial impressions of a counselor's credibility and attractiveness may affect the development of dyadic rapport as well as a client's decision to remain in treatment. Lorion (1978) reported that 30% to 60% of therapy clients terminate within the first six sessions with or without the counselor's approval. The figure is even more dramatic for outpatients of lower socioeconomic status, who have a dropout rate that exceeds 50% after the initial interview (Goldstein, 1971). Problems with attrition and the development of an effective working alliance may sometimes be attributable to the client's perception of the counselor as unlikeable, insufficiently trustworthy, or incompetent. In support of this, studies have found that communicators who were perceived as less credible or expert were less likely to be seen by clients in a second interview (Atkinson & Carskaddon, 1975), and less persuasive in presenting the results of psychological tests (Binderman, Fretz, Scott & Abrams, 1972), and therapeutic interpretations (Browning, 1966).

Recent research has focused on contextual cues in the counseling setting that may influence client perceptions of a counselor's credibility and attractiveness. The effects of counselor attire and the seating arrangement were examined in the present counseling analogue.

Previous research findings with respect to counselor attire have been mixed. Stillman & Resnick (1972) reported that the formality of attire had no impact on client disclosure or ratings of the counselor's attractiveness. Raia (1973) and Drummond (1974), however, found definite

subject preferences for moderately formal counselor apparel. Subsequent investigations underscored the importance of other contextual variables that mediate the perceptual effects of counselor attire. The client's own typical style of dress was found to be of importance by Hubble & Gelso (1978), who concluded: "...clients manifest the most desirable reactions to counselors who dress in a way that is one step or level more formal than the client's own dress level" (p. 584). Similarly, work by Kerr & Dell (1976) and Amira & Abramowitz (1979) found the perceptual impact of counselor attire to be mediated by the interview structure and office furnishings, respectively. Unfortunately the majority of these studies failed to control for systematic behavioral effects that may occur as a function of the counselor's style of dress.

Recommendations regarding the seating arrangement in counseling are based more on intuition than empirical research. White (1952) reported that the removal of a desk between him and his clientele decreased the anxiety level in a significant number of them. In a similar vein, Widgery & Stackpole (1972) found that the counselor-behind-desk arrangement lowered the counselor's credibility rating among high-anxiety but not low-anxiety subjects. These findings suggest a possible correlation between client anxiety and a desire for greater proximity in the seating arrangement. Work in the area of personal space suggests important sex-related differences which may have implications for seating arrangement in the counseling context. In general, women seem to have smaller personal space zones than men (Leibman, 1970; Hartnett, Bailey & Gibson,1970),and heterosexual pairs have smaller zones than same-sex pairs (Evans & Howard, 1973). One might therefore expect male clients to prefer greater distance in relation to a male counselor than would female clients. Conversely,

with a female counselor one might expect female clients to prefer greater distance than would male clients. The present study sought to determine whether the interposition of a desk between a counselor and client would influence subjects' perceptions of the counselor differentially as a function of subject gender.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 103 males and 103 female undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Louisville. Students participated in this study in fulfillment of a course requirement. The modal subject was a 19-year-old freshman.

Instruments

Subjects were shown a counseling analogue consisting in a slide presentation and a synchronized audiotape presentation of a 12-minute segment of an initial interview session adapted from an actual clinical interview (Beck, 1979). This two-component analogue was employed by the author to control for systematic biases in counselor behavior, mannerisms, and/or verbalizations that might occur as a function of the counselor's style of apparel. Each of the four experimental groups viewed one of four matching sets of 12 color slides: (1) a middle-aged, male counselor dressed in formal attire (coat and tie) and seated behind an office desk; (2) the same counselor dressed in formal apparel but with no desk; (3) the counselor dressed in casual attire (jeans and a sports shirt) and seated behind a desk; and (4) the counselor dressed in casual attire with no desk. The slides were highly similar across the four treatment conditions, except along the relevant dimensions, so that, for example, distance, angle, posture, facial expressions, gestures, and so

forth were held constant while differences in attire and seating arrangement were salient. Independent ratings by graduate students verified the slides' similarity across conditions. Thus, all subjects listened to the same audiotaped interview segment while observing one of four sets of slides differing only in terms of the formality of counselor attire and the presence or absence of an office desk.

The Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) was used to measure subjects' perceptions of the counselor's attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness. Each of the three dimensions is represented by 12 7-point bipolar items yielding a scoring range of 12-84 per dimension. Previous research has supported the instrument's reliability (Barak & Dell, 1977) and predictive validity (LaCrosse, 1980). In addition, subjects indicated their willingness to see this counselor in the event counseling was deemed desirable using a 7-point scale (willing-unwilling).

Procedures

Subjects participated in groups of 2-10 students per session. Audiotaped instructions informed subjects of the procedure, requesting that they try to experience the interview analogue from the client's frame of reference. The color slides were photographed at eye level facing the counselor at a distance of approximately five feet in order to facilitate subjects' ability to vicariously assume the client's perspective in evaluating the counselor. The order of the slide presentation, as well as the synchronization in relation to the aural interview, was held constant across conditions through the experimenter's use of a typed protocol which included cues for changing to the next slide. After witnessing the interview segment, subjects were instructed via audiotape to complete the CRF.

Results

Analyses of variance (Counselor Attire X Seating Arrangement X Subject Gender) were conducted on the four dependent measures. No main effects emerged for Counselors Attire, Seating Arrangement, or Subject Gender.

A Counselor Attire X Seating Arrangement interaction was significant in the analyses of perceived counselor attractiveness and expertness, *Fs* (1, 190)= 8.62 and 4.58, *ps*=.004 and .034, respectively. Analyses of simple effects revealed that in the no-desk setting, casual attire elicited higher attractiveness ratings than did formal attire, *F*(1, 101)= 11.82, *p*=.001. In the behind-desk context, however, the counselor was viewed a slightly more expert when dressed in formal rather than casual apparel, *F*(1, 101)=3.26, *p*=.07.

A Seating Arrangement X Subject Gender interaction was found for subjects' perceptions of the counselor's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and subjects' willingness to see the counselor, *Fs*(1, 190)=5.63, 4.80, and 6.12, respectively, *ps* <.05. The interaction approached significance in the analysis of the counselor's perceived expertness. An examination of simple effects revealed that males and females responded in divergent ways to the desk situation. Males reacted more favorably to the behind-desk setting than did females, viewing the courselor as more expert and trustworthy, *F* (1, 101)=6.88 and 6.46, *ps*=.01. Interestingly, among females the desk's presence led to lower attractiveness ratings. In males, on the other hand, the desk was associated with perceptions of greater counselor trustworthiness and greater willingness to see this counselor in the event counseling was desired, *Fs* (1,101)=3.96, 5.08, and 6.97,

respectively, ps < .05.

A regression analysis of the subjects' willingness scores on the three perceptual ratings revealed correlation coefficients of .54, .57, and .56 for ratings of the counselor's attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness, respectively, ps <.001. A multiple correlation coefficient of .62 emerged, indicating that subjects' perceptual ratings accounted for approximately 38% of the variance in their willingness to see the counselor for consultation. Although prediction of subjects' willingness was substantially enhanced by a knowledge of any one perceptual rating -- whether it was the counselor's attractiveness, expertness, or trustworthiness -- the additional information obtained on the basis of the other two ratings added little to the overall predictive power.

Discussion

Consistent with previous findings (Hubble & Gelso, 1978; Amira & Abramowitz, 1979), the data sugest that the meaning of individual cues for a client may be determined only within a more global context of other cues. When dressed in casual attire, for example, the therapist was perceived to be more personally attractive and expert only if he was seated face-to-face with the client. This general preference for a casual context was also found by Bloom, Weigel, & Trautt (1977), who reported subjects to be most favorably impressed by a male therapist when he was viewed in a casual, "humanistic" office setting rather than in one with more traditional decor. Female therapists, however, were found to convey maximally favorable impressions in a formal office context.

Interestingly, although subjects' impressions of the therapist were more favorable when both his attire and seating arrangement were casual,

they did not prefer a mixed setting including both casual and formal arrangements to a consistently formal one. In the behind-desk setting, for example, formal apparel led to significantly greater ratings of expertness. Apparently, subjects considered it important to perceive some congruence between the formality of the therapist's attire and the seating arrangement in the therapy setting.

Previous work in the area of personal space may shed light on the present finding of gender-specific differences in subjects' reactions to the seating arrangement. Females generally prefer smaller zones of personal space, i.e., less distance, than males, particularly when the other communicator is male. The finding that females were less attracted to the counselor when he was seated behind a desk suggests that females may have experienced the desk as a distancing barrier, perhaps impeding his communication of warmth and acceptance. Males, who typically prefer greater interpersonal distance, experienced the counselor as more trustworthy and expressed greater willingness to see him when he was seated behind the desk rather than face-to-face with the client. Although males may have been more concerned than females with contextual evidences of the counselor's professionalism, authority, and expertise, further investigations may help clarify the specific nature of this interaction.

Limitations in the present study necessitate caution in generalizing these findings to actual counseling interactions. First, regardless of whether subjects vicariously participated in the filmed presentation, they were not, in fact, clients, nor were they motivated for counseling. The perceptual orientation of real clients with genuine needs may differ from that of volunteer subjects. Second, the study utilized undergraduates

who probably differ in significant respects from a substantial proportion of persons seeking counseling. The use of more representative samples is recommended. Third, the use of color slides to control for systematic biases in counselor behavior limits the extent to which generalizable findings were obtained.

In light of the importance of nonverbal behavior in affecting subjects' initial impressions of a counselor (Barak, Patkin, & Dell, 1982), further analogue research using counselors who are unaware of the experimental manipulations may be helpful in determining the relevance of various contextual cues in the counseling setting. Future investigations may benefit by incorporating a female counselor, as well as counselors varying in age, race, and other relevant characteristics. Studies aimed at assessing the extent to which early impressions affect client expectations of meaningful intervention and the decision to return for further sessions would seemingly be of practical import to a wide range of counseling settings.

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TABLE 1

MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F RATIOS OF COUNSELOR RATINGS:

COUNSELOR ATTIRE X SEATING ARRANGEMENT

	FORMAL ATTIRE		CASUAL ATTIRE			
	DESK	NO DESK	DESK	NO DESK	F	p
ATTRACTIVENESS	52.31	48.96	50.91	55.26	10.05	.002
	(8.86)	(10.68)	(9.21)	(8.27)		
EXPERTNESS	62.69	59.82	58.40	62.57	5.02	.026
	(12.18)	(13.33)	(12.75)	(10.02)		
TRUSTWORTHINESS	61.53	59.78	62.24	62.56	.70	.406
	(10.48)	(11.30)	(9.34)	(8.89)		

TABLE 2

MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND F RATIOS OF COUNSELOR RATINGS:

SUBJECT GENDER X SEATING ARRANGEMENT

	BEHIND DESK		NO DESK			
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	F	p
ATTRACTIVENESS	53.27	49.95	50.70	53.39	5.82	.017
	(8.22)	(9.54)	(11.19)	(8.69)		
EXPERTNESS	63.67	57.42	61.25	61.13	3.51	.063
	(9.41)	(14.55)	(11.77)	(12.00)		
TRUSTWORTHINESS	64.40	59.36	60.34	61.93	6.03	.015
	(7.83)	(11.10)	(10.72)	(9.77)		